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ABSTRACT

Because outdoor education programs occur in every geographic location, are sponsored by all levels of educational institutions, state and local government agencies, and private entrepreneurs, and have no nationally standardized curriculum or measures of competency or knowledge, outdoor education may best be defines as "education in, about, and for the out-of-doors." This simple, yet comprehensive, definition delineates where the learning takes place (in any outdoor setting), the topic to be taught (the outdoors and any cultural aspects related to the environment), and the purpose of the activity (developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes about the world). While differing in meaning, terms used instead of outdoor education include enviromental education, conservation education, resident outdoor school, outdoor recreation, outdoor pursuits, adventure education, experiential education, and environmental interpretation. When analyzed, the philosophy of outdoor education comes down to four premises: commitment to human responsibility for stewardship of the land; belief in the importance of the interrelationship of all facets of the ecosystem; knowledge of the natural environment as a medium for leisure; and acknowledgment that outdoor education is a continual educational experience. Examples of outdoor education activities and sources of information on definitions, values, philosophies, and history of outdoor education are provided. (NEC)

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OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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OUTDOOR EDUCATION: DEFINITION AND PHILOSOPHY

Prepared by

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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ERIC® CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION and SMALL SCHOOLS

OUTDOOR EDUCATION: DEFINITION AND PHILOSOPHY

There is no nationally standardized outdoor education curriculum and no nationally standardized measure of outdoor education competency or knowledge. Outdoor education programs are sponsored by elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, youth camps, municipal recreation departments, and private entrepreneurs. They exist in every geographic location and are administered by people of widely varied backgrounds. Elementary school teachers, physical educators, biologists, resource managers, and recreation professionals all work in outdoor education programs and may consider themselves outdoor educators. There is no single body of outdoor professionals in outdoor education because the field transcends school boundaries into recreation departments, youth-serving agencies, conservation organizations, resource management agencies, and many other facets of society. As a result, outdoor education is viewed from different perspectives.

WHAT IS A SUGGESTED DEFINITION OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

While there are many definitions of outdoor education, the most comprehensive one seems to be, "Outdoor education is education in, about, and or, the out of doors." This definition tells where the learning takes place, the topic to be taught, and the purpose of the activity. To people in United Kingdom countries (i.e., Canada, Australia, England, Scotland), and among many Americans, outdoor

education refers to recreational activities such as hiking, camping, canoeing, etc. Outdoor education is also referred to as a method or process for extending the curriculum, or a process involving direct learning experiences. Some say it is a place, and others consider it to be a topic. Outdoor education broadly includes programs that may be curriculum-oriented, behavior-oriented, recreation-oriented, conservation-oriented, and/or camping-survival/oriented. In its most inclusive sense, however, outdoor education is education about the outdoors and its many ramifications, in the outdoors, for the purpose of developing knowledge, skills and attitudes concerning the world in which we live.

While simple, this definition can apply to all facets of outdoor education.

WHY IS "EDUCATION IN, ABOUT, AND FOR THE OUTDOORS" THE MOST APPROPRIATE DEFINITION FOR OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

This definition tells the place, the topic, and the purpose of outdoor education. In tells us that outdoor education can occur in any outdoor setting, from a school yard in a industrial neighborhood to a remote wilderness setting, in swamps, meadows, forests, shores, lakes, prairies, deserts, estuaries, and all other biomes. Outdoor education often takes place on a walk around the block, or on a visit to a cemetery, a gravel pit, or an urban renewal project. It can happen on the concrete of a playground, in the weeds of a vacant lot, on the

fringe of a sewage treatment plant, at a city zoo, on a forest trail, or in a national park. These kinds of locations are conducive to first-hand experiences, to direct contact with the topic, and to participant interaction and socialization.

About explains that the topic is the outdoors itself and the cultural aspects related to the natural environment. You may teach about mathematics, biology, geology, communication, history, political science, art, physical skills, or endurance, but learning occurs through the contest of the outdoors. Soil, water, animals, and plants make up the basic areas of study, but students may learn and practice the outdoor activities people pursue during leisure time, or may investigate human alterations of a ecosystem; nevertheless, the educational topic is related to the natural environment. The subject matter of outdoor education is a holistic combination of the interrelationships of all nature and the human being, attitudes for caring for the universe, and skills for utilizing natural resources for human survival and for leisure pursuits. In the broadest terms, the topic is the interrelationship of the human being and the natural resources upon which societies depend, with the goal of stewardship in mind.

Cultural aspects include learning social movements and history through discovering abandoned farms or mills, by analyzing dates and inscriptions on tombstones and identifying the rocks from which they were quarried, or by comparing native plants with those introduced from the Old World as landscape or garden species around old homes.

Students can learn the influence of native people on the land, follow the trails and rivers of explorers and settlers, and develop knowledge and appreciation for cultural heritage as it relates to the land. Culture also includes social issues and decisions that alter or determine utilization of natural resources.

For tells us that the purpose of outdoor education is related to implementing the cognitive, psycho-motor, and affective domains of learning for the sake of the ecosystem itself. It means understanding, using, and appreciating the natural resources for their perpetuation. Understanding means knowledge of the human need for natural resources in ample quantity and quality as the basis of the perpetuation of all societies. Using relates to the use of natural resources for food, heat, power, synthetics, technology, and leisure pursuits. Appreciating refers to the need for humans to look with reverence upon natural systems, upon the aesthetics of nature, and upon their own cultural heritage.

WHAT OTHER TERMS ARE USED INSTEAD OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND HOW DO THEY DIFFER IN MEANING FROM OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

Among the terms and their use are the following:

Environmental education refers to education about the total environment, including population growth, pollution, resource use and misuse, urban and rural planning, and modern technology with its demands upon natural resources. Environmental education is all-encompassing,

while outdoor education is seen by some to relate to natural resources and not to include the wide sense of the world environment. Many people, however, think of outdoor education in its broadest sense and prefer the term outdoor/environmental education.

Conservation education is the wise use of natural resources. It tends to focus on animals, soil, water, and air as single topics in relation to their utilization for timber, agriculture, hunting, fishing and human consumption. It is not usually concerned with preservation, recreation, or human relations and as such is more narrow than outdoor education. The use of this term has decreased since the 1960s.

Resident outdoor school is the process of taking children to a residential camp during school time for a period of usually 3 to 5 days for the purpose of extending the curriculum through learning in the outdoors. This process was originally called camping education. It was later referred to as school camping, but those phrases were discontinued when parents and taxpayers believed they meant the same thing as the summer camp which seemed to be more recreational than educational in focus.

Outdoor recreation means a broad spectrum of outdoor activities participated in during leisure time purely for pleasure or some other intrinsic value. Included are hiking, swimming, boating, winter sports, cycling, and camping. In many countries, and to some extent in the United States, these activities are called outdoor education,

particularly if they are taught in the school as part of the curriculum.

Outdoor pursuits are generally non-mechanized, outdoor recreation activities done in areas remote from the amenities of telephone, emergency help, and urban comforts. To many people, outdoor recreation and outdoor pursuits are similar.

Adventure education refers to activities into which are purposely built elements perceived by the participants as being dangerous. The activities are not inherently dangerous as taught, but appear to be so to the participant and thus they generate a sense of "adventure." Adventure activities include such things as rope courses, white water rafting, mountaineering, and rock climbing (under qualified instruction).

Experiential education refers to learning by doing or experience. Many experiential education activities are synonymous with adventure activities and outdoor pursuits; however, experiential education can also mean any form of pragmatic educational experience. In many ways, outdoor education may be viewed as experiential, especially when the learning takes place through experiences.

Environmental interpretation is a term usually associated with visitor centers administered by national parks or forest service centers. The term refers to a technique used to help visitors understand the meanings of the phenomena on display, while simultaneously whetting the curiosity for more information.

Nature education and nature recreation are learning or leisure activities related to natural resources. The terms were used from the 1920s to the 1950s and the activities were not usually interrelated, nor did they focus on the overriding concerns of ecology and stewardship of the land. They were usually isolated, individual activities using natural resources for equipment and facilities, and involving knowledge of nature.

WHAT IS A RECOMMENDED PHILOSOPHY OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

A philosophy is a system of values relative to ways of behaving. It includes a set of principles for moral and ethical action. A philosophy of outdoor education gives direction for our actions when sponsoring a program. Regardless of whether the program is oriented to specific activities such as backpacking or to certain curricular materials such as the sixth grade geography lesson, the same set of values can persist. When analyzed, the philosophy for outdoor education may be based on four premises:

1. A prime goal of outdoor education is to teach a commitment to human responsibility for stewardship or care of the land. The development of a land ethic that commands us to treat the land and all its resources with respect at all times and on all occasions is the first value for any outdoor education program. It is action-oriented and attitude-developing. It recognizes that whatever is taught in outdoor education must be translated into ethical ecological action.

2. Related to the goal of a land ethic or commitment to stewardship must be the belief in the importance of knowing certain facts or concepts. The cognitive purpose of outdoor education must be that of the interrelationship of all facets of the ecosystem. The interrelationship of natural resources with each other, and with humans and their societal customs, is the underlying curricular objective. The understanding of basic ecological, sociological, and cultural principles is prerequisite to the commitment to an ethic of land stewardship. Concurrently, outdoor education does not mandate specific choices in ecological ethics. It teaches people how to make choices based on facts. It recognizes the difficulty in making choices relative to ecological matters, and prepares people to choose carefully after weighing the impact of the action on the environment, culture, and humanity.

3. The third aspect of outdoor education philosophy relates to the perspective of the human being in the outdoor environment. We not only need to know the natural environment for the survival of the species, we need to know it as a medium through which we spend many hours of leisure. Just teaching people about the interrelationships of the resources will not enhance their leisure hours, nor save them from the miseries encountered in harsh environmental situations. Because we know that humans seek the outdoors for leisure pursuits, it is incumbent upon us to teach the recreator how to live comfortably in the outdoors and how to recreate with a minimum impact on the environment. The quality

of the outdoor recreation experience is directly related to the quantity of the knowledge about the out-of-doors.

4. A fourth philosophical belief is that outdoor education is a continual educational experience. It is not just one field trip, 1 week at outdoor school, or even a once-a-year event. It must be taught at all levels and pursued throughout life.

WHERE CAN OUTDOOR EDUCATION PROGRAMS BE FOUND?

Programs in learning about the outdoors occur at all levels in the educational system, although they are most frequently found in elementary schools. There may be short or long field trips or fifth and sixth graders may spend 5 days at a resident outdoor school. Some schools own and operate gardens, mini-farms, or wood lots. High school curricula may include natural resource oriented programs, or programs involving use of the outdoors for leisure pursuits administered through physical education departments.

Municipal recreation departments and youth serving agencies include outdoor education in their offerings, and membership organizations such as the Audubon Society and National Wildlife Recreation administer 1-day to 2-week programs for youth and adults. Many colleges offer outdoor education courses through departments of education, or physical education and leisure studies, while resource managers sponsor workshops or seminars on natural resource. The government--through the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and other agencies--sponsors

outdoor education programs for leaders and for youth.

WHO CAN PROFIT FROM OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

Like most learning, outdoor education can be a life-long endeavor. All ages, abilities, socio-economic sectors, all people, in short, can benefit from outdoor education. No one can learn all there is to know about the world around them, thus there are continual opportunities to enhance outdoor knowledge, appreciation, and skills. Not only does the learner benefit, but so does society in general, for with increased knowledge there will be increased awareness of the need for an ecological ethic, and a chance for an accompanying educated behavior. The informed voter and citizen can make a bigger impact on social issues involving natural resources if there has been careful education. Outdoor education can encompass many subjects and varied styles of learning. Through exposure to environmental awareness techniques, the right-brained learner can profit. Through learning ecological principles, the left-brained learner can benefit, and through combining the two, all children can acquire a holistic look at the subject utilizing learning styles of both hemispheres.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF WHAT PEOPLE DO IN OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

In a progressive manner, the following are a few outdoor education activities.

-Perceiving nature through the familiar (color, shapes, patterns, lines)

-Using all five senses to become environmentally alert and aware

-Learning ecological principles (e.g., the sun is the source of all energy)--and where they are demonstrated

-Studying plants, animals, soil, water, air, and their interdependence

-Deciphering the history of a pioneer farm

-Solving environmental problems (e.g., how many people can this stream serve?)

-Debating environmental decisions (e.g., what is the best use for this property?)

-Practicing minimun impact camping skills

-Preparing to meet basic human survival needs

-Being sensitive to ecological carrying capacity

-Developing self-reliance

-Understanding climate, weather, wind chill, and snow structure

-Understanding the impact of the interrelatedness of culture, human resources, and natural resources, and how a shift in any one of the three can impact on the other two:

A culture based on use of petroleum products depends upon adequate, available fossil fuel, controlled by humans who depend upon an oil-based culture.

or

Insect-free agricultural produce is expected by people until they realize other resources are negatively affected by the product used to control the insects.

or

Modern society depends upon manufacturing which produces acid rain that in turn causes problems to the people demanding the manufactured products.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ON DEFINITIONS, VALUES, PHILOSOPHIES, AND HISTORY OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

Several references are listed. Among them, the book Fifty Years of Resident Outdoor Education--edited by Dr. William Hammerman—tells much of the history of outdoor education in the United States and of the influence of Lloyd B. Sharp, Julian Smith, William G. Vinal, and other early leaders. The books by Ford and by Smith, Carlson, Donaldson, and Masters also contain information on the history of outdoor education.

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